Plato's *Republic*

Book VI:

Ships, Beasts,
The Sun, and The Divided Line

Ships and Beasts

- Socrates is challenged regarding his assertion that philosophers should govern—lifelong philosophers, after all, “become quite queer, not to say completely vicious; while the ones who seem perfectly decent, do nevertheless suffer at least one consequence of the practice you are praising—they become useless to cities” (487b-d).
- Socrates replies with two analogies—the “ship” and “beast” analogies—that are designed to distinguish *true philosophers* from *thriving sophist-politicians.* These are arguably two of the harshest critiques of

Ship Analogy (488b-489a)

- The ***shipowner*** is the people (*demos*), “deaf and somewhat shortsighted, [with a] knowledge of seamanship pretty much on the same level,” frequently “enchain[ed]” with “mandrake, drink, or something else” by the sailors.
- The ***sailors*** are the politicians, who claim that piloting isn’t teachable and who struggle with each other and with the shipowner to gain control of the ship-of-state’s rudder.
- The ***skilled sailors***, so called, are the successful sophist-politicians, who are “clever at figuring out how they will get the rule,” either through persuasion or force.
- The ***true sailor***, on the other hand, is he who actually knows the art of piloting but is considered a useless “stargazer,” who lacks the skills required to seize control of the ship.

Beast Analogy (493a-c)

- The successful sophist-politician is like the *trainer/breeder* of a great beast, i.e., the *demos*. Learning the beast's language and desires and how to make use of them: *this* he considers wisdom, which he goes about teaching. "Knowing nothing in truth about which of these convictions and desires is noble, or base, or good, or evil, or just, or unjust, he applies all these names *following the great animal's own opinions,* calling what delights it good and what vexes it bad."
- The successful sophist-politician panders, flatters, and also blusters to achieve *power* over the beast; he plays to its fears and desires; he acts as a *demagogue (*or as the *tutor* of one) but in the process he is reduced to the beast's level. (Cf. the description of the tyrant in Book IX.) Rather than *uplifting* the masses, as the philosopher would do if he were empowered, the sophist-politician further *degrades*

These analogies show why the true philosopher (as opposed to the thriving sophist-politician) is shut out of politics:

- Seeing the “madness of the many,” he “keeps quiet and minds his own business,” standing aside under a “little wall” to protect himself against the storm of *sophistry* and *political exploitation*.
- His aims become strictly *private* and *modest:* “he is content if somehow he himself can live his life here pure of injustice and unholy deeds, and take his leave from it graciously and cheerfully with fair hope” (496c-e; cf. the Epicureans).
- If he happens to be born in a “suitable regime,” however, “he himself will grow more and save the common things along with the private,” i.e., in the *kallipolis* the

① The Sun

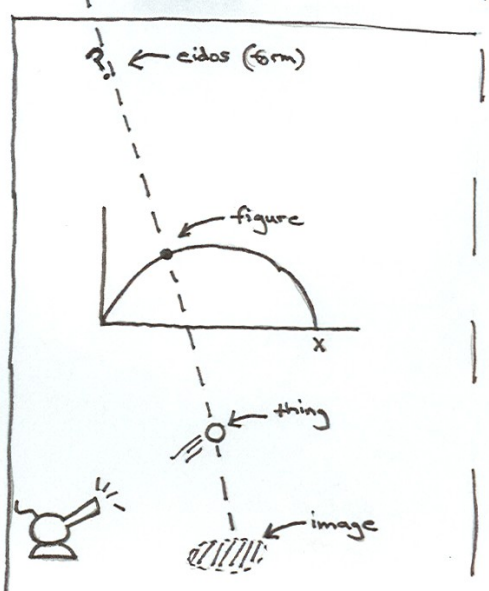
sun —light→ objects (seen)

good —truth?→ forms [eidē] (intellected) [noēsis]

but: idea of "participation"?
good constituted by forms?

path to knowledge (vs. opinion)

good (sun of intelligible world)



② The Divided Line

intelligible
- a noēsis
- b dianoia

visible
- c pistis
- d eikasia

each an epistemic power (dunamis)

$\frac{a+b}{c+d} = \gamma = \frac{a}{b} = \frac{c}{d}$

(1) $a+b = \gamma(c+d)$
(2) $a = \gamma b$
(3) $d = c/\gamma$

sub (2)+(3) into (1) & solve:

$b = c$

from bottom up: ascending the ladder of epistemic powers

① eikasia (perceptual-thought or imagination)
↳ set over eikones (images or qualities)

② pistis (folk-wisdom or trust)
↳ set over things or modes

} visible

③ dianoia (scientific-thought or thought)
↳ set over ta mathēmatica (mathematical objects or figures)
- (a) geometry (deductive)
- (b) physics (inductive)

} use of images & hypotheses

④ noēsis (dialectical-thought or intellection)
↳ set over eidē (forms)

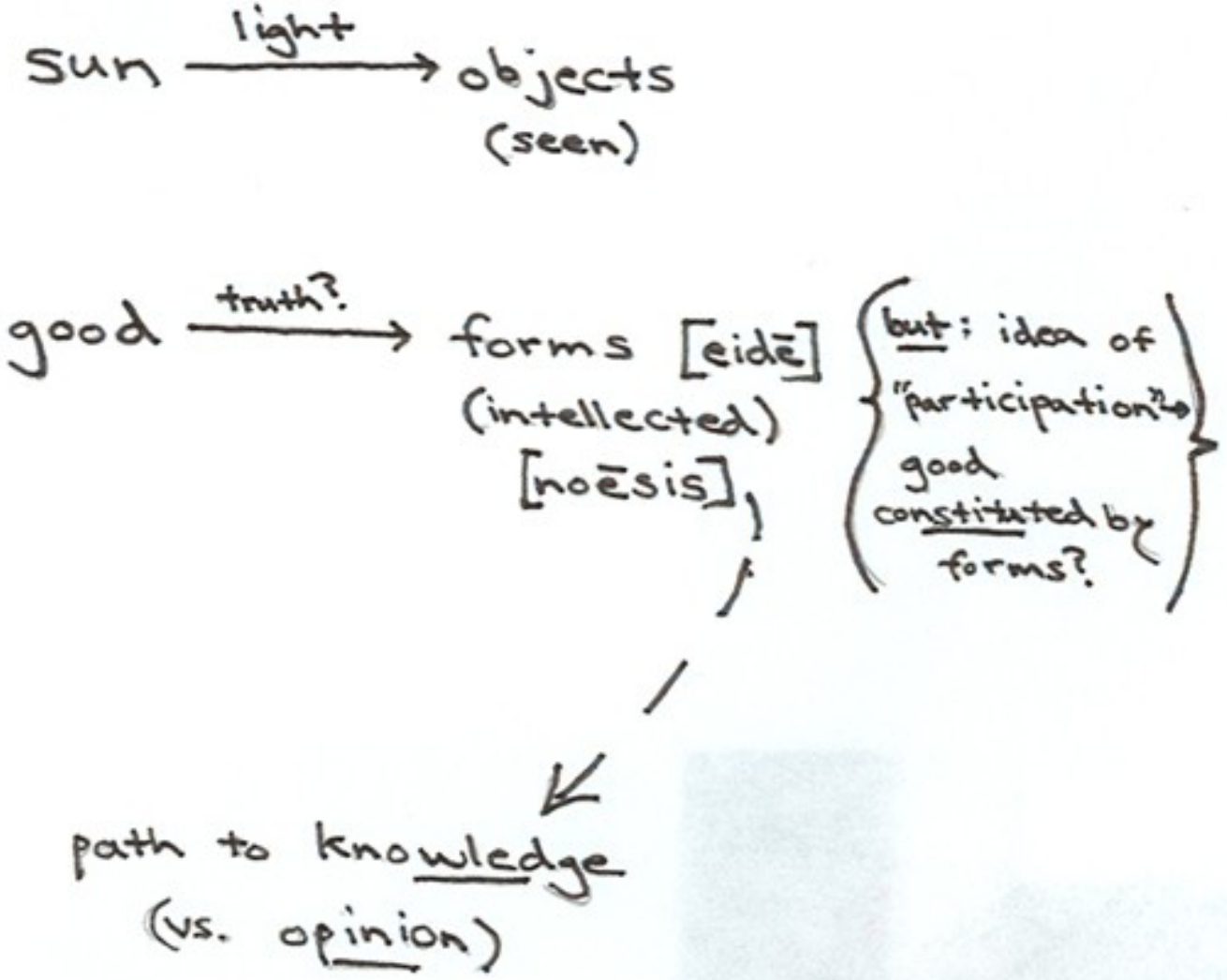
} intelligible

unified example: parabolic path of cannonball casting shadow *

Metaphysics I: The Sun

- "As the good is in the **intelligible** region with respect to intelligence [dialectical-thought or intellection: *noēsis*] and what is intellected [form: *eidos*], so the sun is in the **visible** region with respect to sight and what is seen" (508c).
- In other words, just as the *sun* generates *light* which illumines *objects*, allowing them to be *seen*, so the *good* generates *truth* which illumines the *forms* (*eidē*), allowing them to be *intellected* (508d). This is how ***knowledge*** is achieved: by means of *noēsis,* a kind of "second sight."
- ***Opinion***, on the other hand, is formed when the soul fixes on *visible* objects (things/modes; images/qualities), which are "mixed with darkness" and *changeable* (as part of the "Heraclitan flux")—both features of *opinion* as well (508e).
- As the "cause" of knowledge and truth, the *good* deserves a place of honor (509a). (He says in Book V that "there is something fair itself [the good] and

① The Sun


Sun
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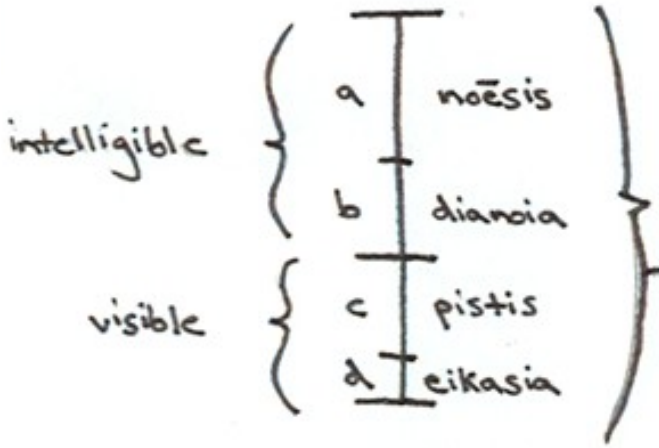
objects
(seen)
good
truth?
forms [eidē]
(intellected)
[noēsis]
but: idea of "participation"
good constituted by forms?
path to knowledge
(vs. opinion)

Metaphysics II: The Divided Line

- One of toughest parts of the *Republic* to understand (apart from 546b-d [the "nuptial number" passage], which is incomprehensible). The "divided line" has *two unequal segments*, each of which is subdivided in the *same ratio* (509e). Starting from the *bottom* of my diagram, each *epistemic** ***power*** (*dunamis**):

1. ***Eikasia*** *(Perceptual-Thought*^{R} *or Imagination*^{B}*), set over* ***eikones*** *(Images or Qualities):* "I mean by images first shadows, then appearances produced in water and in all close-grained, smooth, bright things, and everything of the sort…." (510a) The meaning of this is fairly clear: Images are shadows, reflections, etc., of Things.
2. ***Pistis*** *(Folk-Wisdom* or Trust), set over Things or Modes:* "that of which the first is a likeness—the

② The Divided Line



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(1) $a+b = \gamma(c+d)$

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↓

sub (2) + (3) into (1) + solve:

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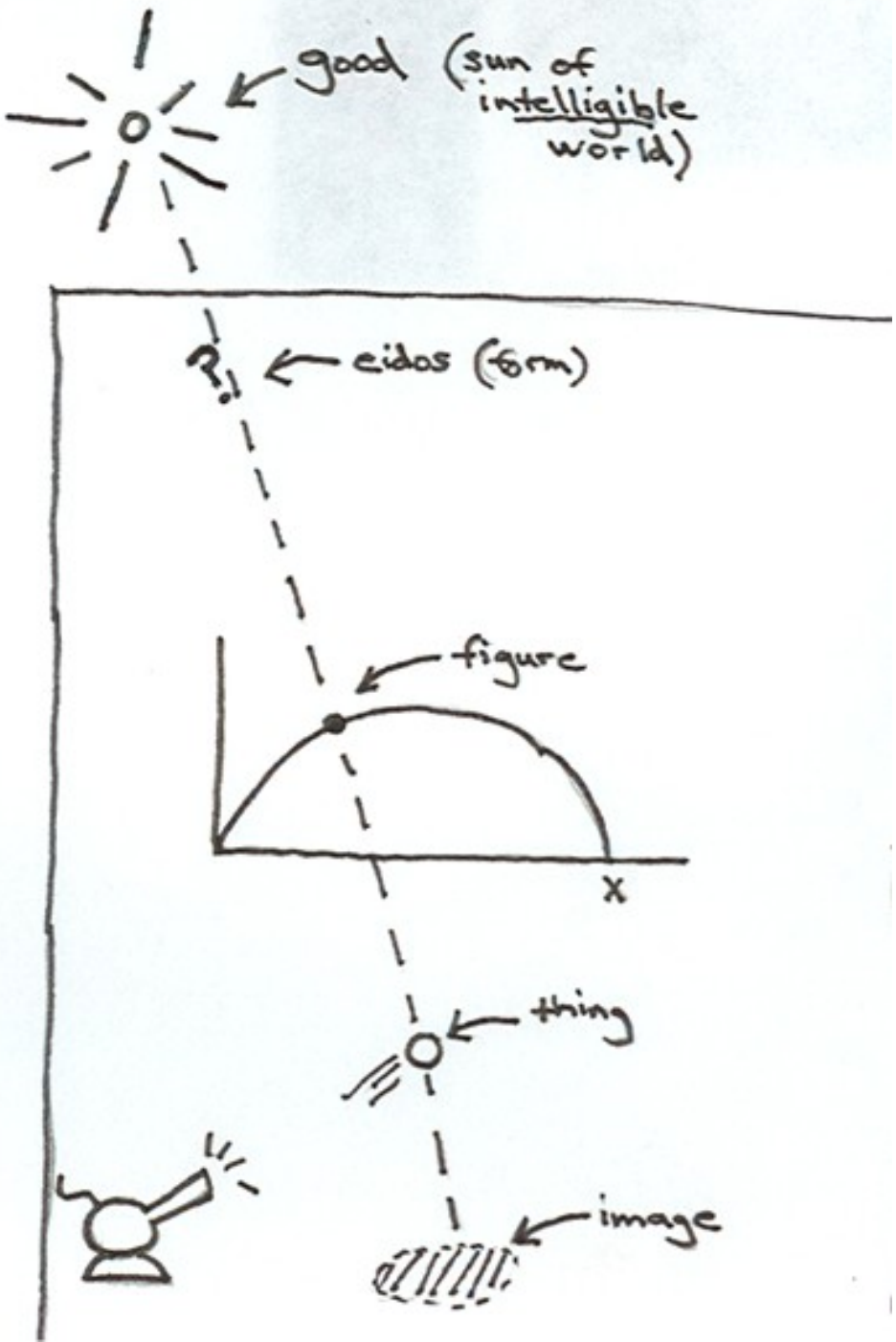
3. ***Dianoia*** *(Scientific-Thought or Thought), set over* ***ta mathēmatica*** *(Figures or Mathematical Objects):* We now move out of the *visible* region and into the *intelligible* region. *Dianoia* is the process of "using as Images the Things that were previously imitated [, and it is] compelled to investigate on the basis of hypotheses and makes its way not to a beginning but to an end" (510b-c). What does *this* mean? To better understand, think about two fields and how they use "suppositions" or "hypotheses" (FN 37), *geometry* and *science:*

   a. In *geometry*, you begin with axioms that cannot themselves be proven and then work from them to desired outcomes (e.g., a proof of the Pythagorean Theorem). ↑ Geometrical objects *in the world* (e.g., a square drawn on paper) can be thought of as a kind of Image (shadow or reflection) of the Figure of a square, which is

b. In *science*, you pose hypotheses and then test them; hypotheses that survive repeated testing are elevated to the status of *theories* and even *laws*. These hypotheses are *always* tentative: to be scientific claims, they must be *falsifiable*—we may be highly confident about them, but we are never *certain* about them. *We use them to understand and control the world around us.* Physical processes in the world (e.g., a projectile on a parabolic trajectory) can be thought of as a sort of Image (shadow or reflection) of the Figure of a projectile in a *scientific model* of such a trajectory. ***(See my diagram.)***

But geometry and science are considered *limited* by Socrates: they are unable to "go to a beginning because [they are] unable to step out *above* the hypotheses" (511a). In other words, they cannot *prove* axioms or


good (sun of intelligible world)
?!
eidos (form)
figure
x
thing
image

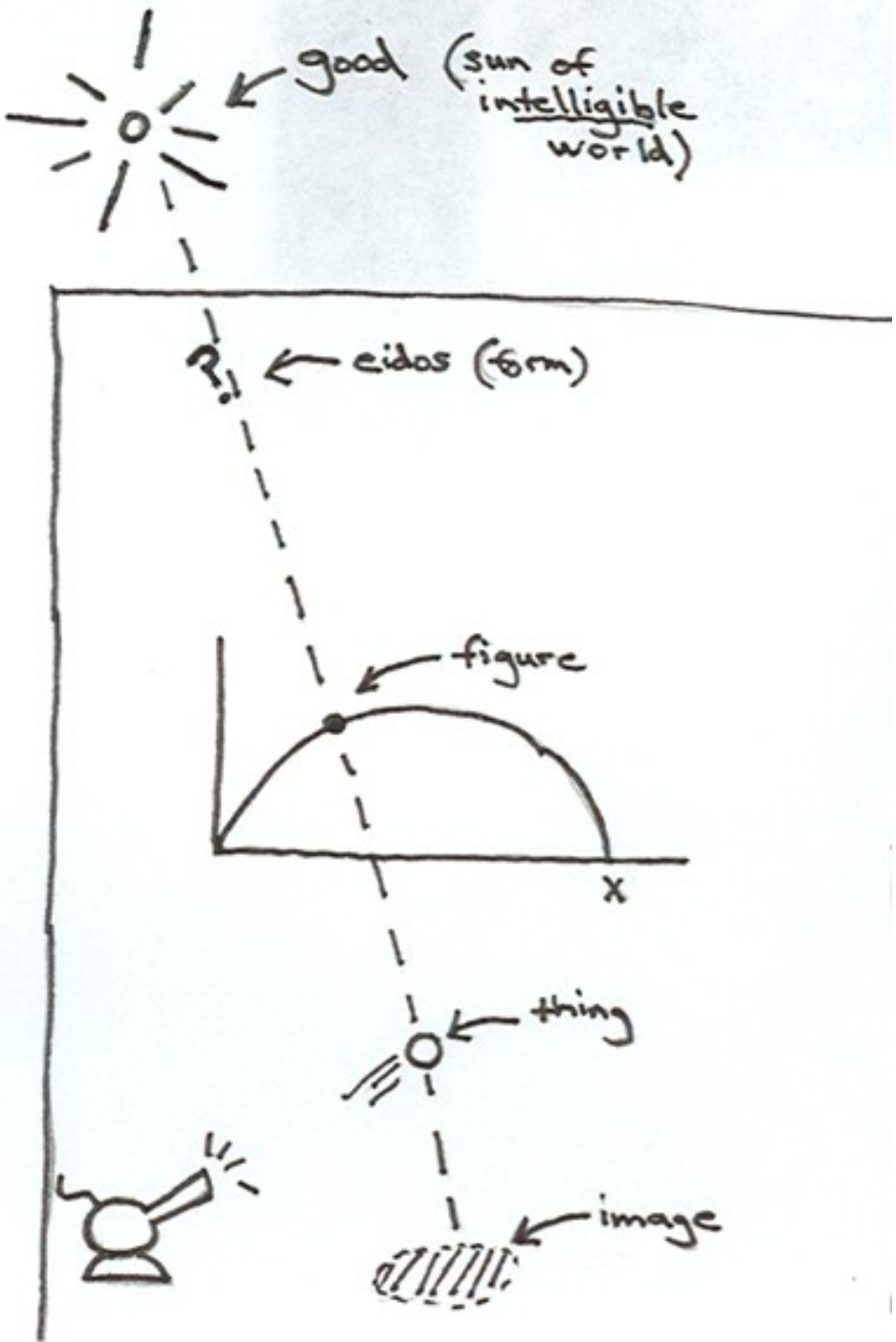
4. ***Noēsis*** *(Dialectical-Thought or Intellection), set over* ***eidē*** *(Forms): Noēsis* is the process of "making [our] way to a beginning…free from hypotheses; starting out from hypothesis and without the images used in the other part, by means of the forms themselves it makes its inquiry through them" (510b-c). What in the world does *this* mean? Good question. We're now into the murkiest and (apparently) the most mystical part of Platonic metaphysics.

   Socrates seems to believe (511b-c) that rather than learning about the intelligible world *indirectly* by way of math & science, we can come to know it *directly* through the Good as well as the Forms (*eidē*) that it illuminates. From this "beginning of the whole," we can work our way down to a *certain* knowledge of *everything*, including

Such knowledge will not just *transcend* mathematical and scientific thought but also allow it to be *perfected*. Hence Plato's belief that the philosopher kings, once they have attained *en**light**enment*, will be in a better position to rule the *kallipolis*, the Form of which they will have Intellected and the Image of which they will try to construct on earth. *{form → PPE, PA, etc.}*

See the unified example (cannonball) in my diagram.

We're not going to get *much* closer to understanding Dialectical-Thought (*noēsis)* than this, though we will be further tantalized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